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ABSTRACT

In order to assess current ideas, reveal their shortcomings, and suggest steps for future investigation, this review of the literature on teaching poetry discusses definitions of poetry, references on teaching poetry, teaching methods, poetic forms, experimental research, and the benefits of poetry. The paper concludes that the lack of empirical research and the glut of anecdotal writing on teaching poetry will increase the body of knowledge, but will not advance it. (SRT)

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Teaching Poetry in Elementary Grades

A Review of Related Literature

Theresa N. Amann

Running head: TEACHING POETRY

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Educators are in general agreement about the great value of poetry for elementary school children. The consensus is that children should be exposed to poetry through listening, reading, and writing. The available literature on this topic consists mostly of anecdotal reports of teachers' experiences with poetry in their own classrooms. There is a severe lack of experimental research in the field.

Poetry lacks the competitive spirit found in academic fields such as reading and mathematics. There appears to be no national movement to push the body of knowledge ahead. This should be a cause of concern to educators. "The appreciation of poetry in our culture has now become so marginal that only effective, sympathetic and imaginative teaching can save it from extinction - and the teaching must begin with the very young" (Wilmer, 1984, p. 47). Through this critical appraisal of the related literature, current ideas will be reviewed, shortcomings shown, and steps for future investigation suggested.

Definitions of Poetry.

Websters Third New International Dictionary defines poetry as "writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged

to create a specific emotional response through its meaning, sound, and rhythm" (p. 1749). Most authors decline to define poetry or do so in only the broadest of terms. Weiger (1971) refers to it as simply a form of communication. Vitiello (1983) writes "... poetry need not rhyme or fall into metric patterns or conform to any narrow rules of English" (p. 741). McCracken and McCracken (1979) define poetry as "... just saying something nice about something" (p. 810).

References.

The majority of references for this review were located in journals. A prime source is Language Arts, formerly titled Elementary English. The authors of articles on the topic are predominantly current or former elementary classroom teachers. With the exception of Shapiro and Shapiro (1971), they did not review the recent literature before writing their contribution to the field. As a result the literature is filled with creative lessons for the classroom teacher but contains no theory on how to develop poetic intuition in children. Other references included teaching guides made available by the ERIC Document Reproduction Service.

Teaching Methods.

The first step in exposing children to poetry is often seen as reading it aloud to them.. Woodburn (1976) states that children prefer humorous poems, narratives about animals, and real-life experiences. Several authors recommend the verse of Shel Silverstein (Naumann, 1980; Rogers, 1985; Woodburn, 1986). Other recommendations include Hailstones and Halibut Bones (Mackintosh, 1971) and A Time for Poetry (Fitzgerald, 1982). Woodburn (1976) suggests that teacher-made poetry tapes be made available at listening centers. This would allow children to hear their favorite poems during free moments.

Hennings (1972) brings out the importance of pre-writing activities. After a short discussion on snow she asked her class of college education majors to write a short poem. The students did not know where to begin. She then led them through several pre-poetry activities. Brainstorming produced a pool of ideas written on slips of paper. Working in groups, the ideas were read aloud allowing for listening to sound relationships in words. The slips of paper then were arranged in blocks involving the students in the visual dimensions of poetry. "This experience suggests that pre-poetry play ... can be

a fruitful introduction to poetry - an introduction that makes poetry writing fun rather than frustration" (Hennings, 1972, p. 1151).

In a poetry activity based on a hot air balloon championship, Boodt (1982) utilized the following pre-writing activities: reading and discussing selected books on ballooning, art activities, and brainstorming lists of descriptive words. Cline's (1971) pre-writing activities included choosing a subject and then searching for magazine pictures and individual words that describe it.

Working in groups is seen as another way of helping children become comfortable with poetry writing (Applebee, 1975; Hennings, 1972). Vitiello (1983) describes a poetry program for children six to ten years of age. Sitting in a circle each child takes a turn to respond to the topic at hand. The teacher records all contributions. Students in Naumann's (1980) third grade discovered that areas of weakness could be detected if the group looked at a potential poem in outline form.

Poetry is described as coming alive for children through an artist-in-residence program (Riggs, 1982; Stein, 1972). Arranged through the home state's Council on the Arts, professional poets spend several weeks

sharing their work and conducting workshops at elementary schools. A simpler version of such an effort is presented by Parker (1981). Teachers of different disciplines worked together to prepare for students for the one day visit of a poet.

Lesson plans for poetry are available from several sources. "Prime time for rhyme time: A guide for developing primary reading, spelling and speaking vocabularies through poetry" (Burney, 1981) is designed to help teachers provide high interest independent work for first graders. It contains bulletin board ideas, poems, and word lists. "Project MOPPET: A K-3 humanities program contains lesson plans with an emphasis on positive attitudes toward education (Kohler, 1976). A contributor to the guide emphasizes that teachers must be comfortable teaching poetry.

Poetic Forms.

The use of strict poetic forms by child poets is deemed inhibiting by some authors (Rogers, 1985; Rouse, 1983; Weiger, 1971). Harp (1972) writes "Let's be content with only a rudimentary understanding of poetry by children ... We must recognize that we can lay the ground work early for positive attitudes toward poetry" (p. 1176).

Geiger (1971) had her students create "found poetry" by rearranging prose lines found in library books to bring out their poetic quality. Cline (1971) believes children should be made aware of similes, metaphors, rhythm, and rhyme but that free verse should be explored before trying specific forms such as haiku. McCracken and McCracken (1971) suggest the use of "string poetry" to create poems. This idea involves arranging and rearranging word cards on strings to make different combinations.

Form need not be avoided entirely. Woodburn (1976) provides 12 poetic forms and examples but stresses waiting until children want to imitate a particular form. Applebee (1975) describes a three day project creating cinquains.

Experemental Research.

Shapiro and Shapiro (1971) executed a well designed research study comparing two alternative experimental programs for poetry writing: free lessons vs. semi-structured. Each program was administered for the same length of time in a relatively free classroom environment and provided six occasions in which children had an opportunity to write original poetry. The experimental subjects were

students in fourth grade classes in a middle class suburban school system. They were randomly assigned into two groups. The measurement instrument was a rating scale based on five elements of poetry: unity, choice of words, rhythm, imagery, and affective quality. In addition, three independent variables were used as pretest measures. These were intelligence, language achievement, and creativity.

Both programs resulted in statistically significant improvement in children's ability to write original poems. The semi-structured lessons were more effective. Because both were successful to some extent the researchers state that there is no single method for teaching poetry. A variety of alternatives, they advise, should be investigated.

The research study described above is important for several reasons. It provides future researchers with a measurement instrument for evaluating children's poetry. It establishes the need for further research in this field. It points out areas in need of investigation such as the effect of poetry lessons on skill in dealing with prose and development of self-concept. Through research such as this the field of poetry will be advanced.

Statistical data are needed to verify the benefits of methods of teaching poetry.

Benefits of Poetry.

The benefits of poetry are seen as many in the reviewed literature. It can easily be integrated into other disciplines (Carlson & Reische, 1979). It is well suited for the many transition periods found in the school day (Fitzgerald, 1982). Poetry is a way for young children to experiment with language as training for later exploration of literature. It is also seen as a form of self-expression. Wilmer (1984) suggests that poetry helps children to respond and react to the world around them and understand it verbally. Writing poetry, according to Boodt (1982), gives children an opportunity to use language rather than study about it. She says that the emphasis should be on process rather than product. Thus, children will feel pride at having experienced the joy of creating.

Summary and Conclusions.

To date most of the available information on teaching poetry in elementary schools is written out of personal experience and not subjected to formal testing. Many of the lesson ideas presented describe an activity

which takes place over a short period of time. There is a lack of literature dealing with how poetry fits into the year long elementary school curriculum.

Raising the creative level of children depends to a great extent on the teacher (Cline, 1971). Weiger (1971) laments "... the lack of a place for poetry in the automated world of mass-produced thought and emotion" (p. 1002). In the modern world of technology educators must fight to make room for humanities in the elementary school curriculum. This will only come about through carefully planned and executed research. Statistical evidence must be made available to support the noted benefits of teaching poetry in elementary schools. Its effects on creativity and feelings of self-worth must be made clear. Without adequate research the present body of knowledge will not advance but instead merely increase in size through repetition of ideas.

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